



# SOCIAL NETWORKING TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF ALTERNATIVE TOURISM: THE CASE OF COUCHSURFING.ORG

Jennie Germann Molz

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of the Holy  
Cross, USA

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to examine the role social networking technologies play in the moral economy of alternative tourism. The study takes as its empirical focus the online hospitality exchange network Couchsurfing. Using the concept of ‘moral affordances’, the analysis outlines the way Couchsurfing’s technical systems, software design, and search algorithms enable participants to engage in a moral economy based on the non-commodified provision of accommodation to strangers and personal relations of trust and intimacy. Findings suggest that these affordances are not isolated effects of the technologies themselves, but rather reflect a broader moral landscape in which alternative tourism is performed. **Keywords:** alternative tourism, Couchsurfing, moral affordances, moral economy, sharing economy, social networking technologies. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

The moral and ethical dimensions of mass tourism and its alternatives have long been a central theme in tourism studies. Early discussions of modern tourism, from Boorstin’s (1961) condemnation of ‘tourist bubbles’ to Turner and Ash’s (1975) depiction of ‘golden hordes’ of tourists pushing against the ‘pleasure periphery’, drew attention to the morally questionable effects of a jet-fuelled, pleasure-peddling tourism industry. Ever since, critics have lamented the social, environmental and economic consequences of modern tourism

---

**Jennie Germann Molz** (Department of Sociology and Anthropology; College of the Holy Cross; 1 College Street; Worcester, MA 01516; USA; <jmolz@holycross.edu>) is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, USA. She is a co-editor of the journal *Hospitality & Society* and author of *Travel Connections: Tourism, Technology and Togetherness in a Mobile World* (Routledge, 2012). Her research focuses on the social and civic implications of tourism mobilities and technology. She has published extensively on the topics of tourism, mobility, hospitality, globalization, cosmopolitanism, and new technologies.

while pointing to a variety of ‘alternatives’, such as ‘ecotourism’, ‘sustainable tourism’, ‘responsible tourism’ and ‘ethical tourism’, that seemed to offer a solution to tourism’s many problems (Buckley, 1994; Hultsman, 1995; Jafari & Wall, 1994; MacCannell, 2011; Smith & Duffy, 2003).

As alternative tourism gained traction, however, it also attracted criticism of its own. Cohen (1987) noted quite early on in the debate that alternative tourism itself merits critical examination, not least of all because it ushers in new sets of problems and in many cases reproduces the very structures it seeks to subvert. With mass tourism serving as a lightning rod for what is ‘wrong’ with tourism, and alternative tourism serving as a contested emblem of ‘right’, or at least ‘better’, ways to travel, these debates have offered tourism scholars a lens through which to examine the ever shifting contours of tourism’s moral landscape.

While the debate over the moral qualities of mass tourism and the moral limits of alternative tourism is never far from our minds, every now and then it enjoys renewed vitality as new tourism practices emerge. We have seen this most recently with the cases of ‘slow tourism’ (Dickinson & Lumsden, 2010; Fullagar, Markwell, & Wilson, 2012), ‘voluntourism’ (Lyons & Wearing, 2008), and, the focus of this paper, free hospitality exchange networks. Like their predecessors, these new forms of alternative tourism challenge the for-profit logic of mass tourism and promote more intimate and authentic connections with people and places (see Cohen, 1987). However, unlike alternative tourism practices that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, today’s alternative practices are increasingly shaped by new social networking technologies. For example, many voluntourists post photos of their volunteering activities on Facebook (Conran, 2012), slow tourists often travel with laptop computers (Markwell, Fullagar, & Wilson, 2012), and hospitality exchange sites like Couchsurfing.org use online social networking technologies to connect travelers with hosts willing to offer free accommodation.

For the most part, however, the literature has not fully engaged with alternative tourists’ use of technology, even though increasing numbers of tourists now use a variety of information and communication technologies while on the road. The aim of this article is to bring social networking technologies into debates surrounding alternative tourism and to examine the moral affordances of these technologies in the context of alternative tourism practices. The empirical focus of the article is the online hospitality networking site Couchsurfing.org, which coordinates the free exchange of hospitality among travelers. Like many other alternative tourism initiatives, Couchsurfing is defined by a specific moral agenda, expressed in the project’s mission to ‘create a better world, one couch at a time’ by facilitating ‘meaningful connections’ among its members (Couchsurfing, 2012). As will become clear in the discussion that follows, many Couchsurfers define a ‘better world’ as one in which people connect in more authentic and meaningful ways outside of the corporate grid of consumer society (Germann Molz, 2012). In this sense, Couchsurfing is based on a ‘moral economy’,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1007190>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1007190>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)